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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 001321

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SUBJECT: (SBU) PERSONNEL CHANGES IN VIETNAM'S COMMUNIST PARTY

1. (SBU/NF) Summary: Personnel shifts within the Communist Party in Southern Vietnam indicate that jockeying for position ahead of the party's 10th Congress in 2006 is underway. A contact close to the Party told us that the Party's Central Committee had begun to consider who might succeed Prime Minister Phan Van Khai. One top candidate, HCMC Party Secretary and Politburo member Nguyen Minh Triet was diagnosed recently with cancer, casting a cloud over his prospects. Meanwhile, Triet had one of his proteges named as deputy of the HCMC branch of the Party. End Summary.

CPV personnel shifts begin

2. (SBU) On October 9, HCMC media reported that the Politburo had decided to reassign and promote Mr. Le Hoang Quan, Communist Party Secretary of Dong Nai Province, to Deputy Secretary of the Party

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in HCMC. Quan, a member of the Party's Central Committee, will replace Vo Van Cuong, who was responsible for anti-corruption efforts, internal party personnel and discipline for the Party in HCMC. He will report directly to Politburo member and HCMC Party Secretary Nguyen Minh Triet.

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3. (SBU/NF) Two ConGen contacts, a prominent member of the local Chinese community and a Viet Kieu businessman, both with long-term contacts with the Party, told us that Quan is a protégé of Triet's --both hail from Binh Duong province in southern Vietnam. The contacts added that Quan is one of the individuals responsible for making Dong Nai province one of the more investor-friendly and economically dynamic provinces in the region.

4. (SBU/NF) Our sources said that Triet is grooming Quan to become his replacement. If all goes according to plan, current HCMC People's Committee Chairman Le Thanh Hai -- another serious contender for the top slot in the HCMC Party structure -- would be transferred to Can Tho next year to be Party Secretary, clearing the field for Quan when the HCMC Party unit holds its organizational Congress next year.

5. (SBU/NF) However, our contacts speculated that Quan might have to replace Triet as HCMC Party leader sooner rather than later. They told us that, in September, Triet was diagnosed with prostate cancer. A specialist at HCMC's Franco-Viet hospital separately confirmed Triet's illness and said that Triet would have to travel to Singapore for treatment, as Vietnamese hospitals did not have the capability to treat the disease effectively.

Triet as Prime Minister?

6. (SBU/NF) Triet's illness may have national political implications. The HCMC Party leader has been widely mentioned as a leading contender for Prime Minister when incumbent Phan Van Khai's term ends in 2007. One of our sources told us that in an internal straw poll of the Party's Central Committee in June 2004, Triet was selected as first option to replace Van Khai, with fellow southerners and politburo members Truong Tan Sang and Nguyen Tan Dung ranked second and third respectively. Triet's cancer diagnosis may call into question his ability to serve as PM. (Traditionally, the post of Prime Minister has gone to a southerner, President to a party member from central Vietnam and General Secretary of the Party to a northerner.)

7. (SBU/NF) According to our business contact, Triet has indicated that he would prefer to see Dung as PM rather than Sang. Sang, now head of the Central Economics Commission, was Party Secretary of HCMC when Triet was promoted to become his deputy. The two reportedly had a falling out in the year they served together before Sang was transferred to Hanoi. Dung, meanwhile, is another high profile southerner and a protégé of former PM Vo Van Kiet. Dung is charged by the Politburo to oversee efforts to manage development and ethnic minority issues in the Central Highlands. He also is head of the Mekong Delta Development Commission and has a strong power-base in the Can Tho region.

8. (SBU/NF) Comment: The Party is extremely opaque, particularly

on personnel issues. Nonetheless, the promotion of Quan and the other information our contacts are reporting highlight that Party members already have become deeply enmeshed in internal maneuvering in the run-up to the 2006 Party Congress.

WINNICK